Economic & Political WEEKLY

Hiduism and Politics
Author(s): Gail Omvedt
Source: *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 25, No. 14 (Apr. 7, 1990), pp. 723-729
Published by: Economic and Political Weekly
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/4396131
Accessed: 20/08/2013 12:40

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Hiduism and Politics

Gail Omvedt

This paper examines the role of 'Hinduism' in the course of socio-historical development in the Indian sub-continent, how there has been a gradual process of construction of a 'Hindu' community and one of rendering it increasingly militant. Yet, this militant Hindu ideology—of identifying India as Hindu and Hinduism as nationalism—is merely getting more aggressive, not predominant in society. Its rise is as much attributable to the political weakness of secular and socialist forces.

The Political Rise of Militant Hinduism

'THE REAL WINNER' was the title India's popular newsmagazine, *The Illustrated Weekly*, gave to its cover feature following India's recent general elections last November. The reference was to the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the political party representing the ideology of militant Hinduism (*Hindutva*). Winning an estimated 15 per cent of the popular vote-with a steady rise over the years from 3 per cent in the first post-independence election--the BJP ended up with 88 seats out of a total 525 in the Indian parliament. It is now the third largest political party in the country, following the Congress (with 192 seats in parliament) and the Janata Dal (143 seats). The 'Left Front' of various Communist parties comes fourth with 52 seats. Both the Janata Dal and the Left Front have strong disagreements with the BJP's politics of *Hindutva*, but the Janata Dal requires the support of the BJP to stay in power. The BJP has given this support; the Janata Dal has taken it of course—it had 'seat adjustments' with the BJP in many states in order to present a 'united front' against the Congress—and the Left Front has had no choice but to support the Janata Dal, with which it was also allied during the elections. Regionally the BJP's stronghold continues to be the Hindi belt, but its greatest support came not from UP and Bihar, where it won a total of only 15 seats, but from Madhya Pradesh (27 to 40 seats), Rajasthan (13 of 25), Gujarat (12 of 24) and even Maharashtra where its alliance with the aggressive and growing Shiv Sena won 14 (of 48) seats. In other states, it came in a close second to emerge as the biggest opposition party in those states. It is also making a solid organisational growth in the south and even in West Bengal, though its percentage of the vote is not sufficient to give it seats.

More significantly—and alarmingly for those concerned about secular and democratic politics in India—this has happened after the BJP swung away a phase of liberalism identified with the 'Gandhian socialism' promoted by Atal Bihari Vajpayee to a clear identification with the militant Hinduism of the core cadre group, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS). With a largely brahman-dominated leadership, the BJP can now be fairly said to be the political front of the RSS. This change was consolidated by two decisions taken in 1989. The first was to accept an alliance in Maharashtra with the Shiv Sena, even if it meant isolation from 'democratic and left' forces. The Shiv Sena itself decided only a few years back (in 1984) to shift from an anti-south India identification as a party of Maharashtrian chauvinism to an endorsement of *Hindutva*, and after capturing control of the Bombay municipal corporation in 1985 it spread rapidly into the countryside, using large funding and a virulent anti-Muslim, anti-dalit (anti-Buddhist; in Maharashtra, the largest section of dalits have converted to Buddhism) line which provoked communal riots in many small towns and villages. In the alliance, which continues to have its tensions, the Shiv Sena provides fanatic cadres, criminal and *goonda* elements and a non-brahman (largely non-Maratha, non-dalit 'other backward castes') mass base, while the BJP provides a sophisticated brahman leadership with control of newspapers and mass organisations (among peasants, youth, tribals and women) throughout the state. It is this alliance that has emerged as the major opposition to the Congress in Maharashtra, reducing the Janata Dal and Left forces to a mere six parliamentary seats. The flavour of its politics can be discerned in the claim of Shiv Sena leader Bal Thackeray made before the recent assembly elections in the state that they would win and that the *bhagwa zenda* (the saffron-coloured flag of Hinduism)—rather than the national flag—would fly over the assembly hall.

The second major decision of the BJP, made at its June 1989 national executive meeting, was to wholeheartedly endorse the *Ramjanmabhoomi* campaign of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP). The VHP has been in existence since 1964, but it began expanding in the 1980s following the much-publicised Meenakshipuram conversion of dalits to Islam in 1981, when it took the line of reconverting all Muslim and Christian Indians to Hinduism. It has an apparently liberal definition of Hinduism, where 'Hinduism' is taken to include the five groups of Sikhism, Jainism, Buddhism, Arya Samaj and *Sanatani Dharma* (or traditionalist Hindus), but it seems fairly clear that traditional Hinduism is its core. The VHP has, for instance, formed a *Dharma Sansad*, which is supposed to guide its actions, bringing together *sadhus* and religious heads of the various and contending sects within Hinduism. Its campaigns have been extremely aggressive and are frequently characterised by Hindu-Muslim rioting. The most recent one, the *Ramjanmabhoomi* campaign, is an attempt to build a temple at what is supposed to be the birthplace of Ram (Ayodhya) on the site where a mosque the Babri Masjid exists. The VHP insists that the temple was originally on the site and was destroyed by aggressive Muslims to build their mosque, and that Hindus are only reclaiming their own heritage. The issue is extremely inflammatory, and the VHP hugely and astutely mobilised forces on the issues.

On November 9, 1989 there was a bricklaying ceremony (*shilanyas*) at the disputed site—hundreds of thousands of consecrated bricks were brought from villages throughout India—supposedly one from each village. Increasingly provocative speeches and actions from organisations like the VHP have led to not just riots, but massive killing of Muslims in towns and villages in Madhya Pradesh, UP and Bihar in the months preceding the general election—a slaughter which some have considered as bad as those at the time of partition. At Bhagalpur, for instance, the pogrom claimed a thousand lives, and the systematic destruction of Muslim holy places and property.

The increasing control of the RSS over the BJP, the BJP's identification with organisations like the Shiv Sena and the VHP, the BJP's decision to make alliances but politically stand alone, if need be, and its success in doing so—all show the increasing power of an ideology of militant Hinduism in Indian society and politics. (There are of course similar trends among Muslims, Christians and other groups, and the rise of each has to be analysed, but because of its potent claim to be the 'majority community' Hinduism is the focus here.) Many have argued that 'fundamentalism' and 'revivalism' are inadequate concepts to analyse *Hindutva*, since its 'modern' organisational consolidation and its identification with nationalism and the nation-state are very alien to traditional religious characteristics of India. Some claim that the whole concept of 'Hinduism'—as opposed to Shaivism, Vaishnavism, etc—is a modern, post-British

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construct. What is clear is that since the end of the nineteenth century, in a line running from Tilak, Savarkar and others through the Hindu Mahasabha and the RSS in the pre-independence period, and the RSS, Bharatiya Jan Sangh-BJP (and all connected organisations) and newer, increasingly aggressive organisations like the Shiv Sena the ideology of identifying *India as Hindu and Hinduism as nationalism* has gained increasing weight and power—at the cultural, social and political level.

At the same time, this 'Hindu identification' is by no means becoming more liberal and reformed as it grows stronger. Its traditional forms of hierarchy and subordination are merely becoming updated. With regard to women, for instance, this can be easily seen. The BJP has a few scattered women leaders and MPs, and its women activists are to be found in women's organisations in many places. Yet its leaders are the main defenders of such traditions as the horrifying revival of *sati*—Bhairon Singh Shekhawat, considered the BJP 'strongman' in Rajasthan, was the main organiser of the pro-sati forces in that state. It mainly uses its work in women's issues to make the demand for a "common civil code" a platform against Muslims, who are clinging in turn to their religious personal law as an affirmation of their identity. The updating of patriarchy is obvious in the TV version of the *Ramayana*: in the original, as is well known, Rama sends Sita away and then asks her to undergo the fire ordeal *(agni pariksha)* because doubts are being raised in the kingdom about whether she really remained chaste during her period of captivity with Ravana. This outright assertion of male chauvinism is too stark for a somewhat liberation-conscious modern middle class, and so—in a stark depiction of the internationalisation of patriarchy—Sita herself comes to an agonised Rama with folded hands and asks to be allowed to leave.

In regard to caste hierarchy, this updating of subordination is equally subtle. The organisations arguing for the 'solidarity of Hindus' nearly all use such slogans as 'forgetting caste'; they incorporate low castes and dalits into religious ceremonies in various ways (and some have been arguing for the right of 'untouchables' to enter temples since the 1920s); they connect the various low castes and tribal groups with the 'glorious history' of Hindus through identification with various legendary figures such as Valmiki, Arundatiya, etc. Yet the reference to tradition inevitably involves a reassertion of hierarchy, even if it is sought to be modified and even glamorised: in the TV version of Mahabharata's Ekalavya episode (in which the adivasi boy Ekalavya is first denied training in archery by Dronacharya because he is not a *kshatriya*, and then when he trains himself by doing puja to a statue of Dronacharya he is told to cut off his thumb and present it as *guru-dakshina*—thereby depriving him of the power to fight and compete with true *kshatriyas)*, the Pandava brothers are shown as protesting against the 'injustice' of the demand for Ekalavya's thumb while Dronacharya is shown as saying it was only because Ekalavya 'stole' the education; this is an attempt at humanisation, but the rigidity of the *varna* hierarchy remains. Hierarchy is also continually re-established in social reality, with the greater access to wealth, education and political influence allowing upper castes (and traditional, even feudal, elites) to retain control of the organisations of militant Hinduism. One result is that caste tensions continually break out even within the *Hindutva* fold (for instance with Bal Thackeray mocking the RSS as *chaddiwalas*, Brahman boys in short pants who can't fight), but the ability of any of the traditionally lower communities to rebel is overcome by their maintenance of loyalty to the Hindu unity with its subtle but reasserted hierarchy.

This rise of the social and political power of organisations basing themselves on an ideology of militant Hinduism raises many questions. One is that of *why* this growth (and similar growth of 'fundamentalist' forces, or 'identity politics') is taking place at this particular historical period, at the end of the twentieth century, in an era of computers, space exploration and burgeoning technological achievements. The other question, to be focused on here, is that posed by the ideology itself: the ideology asserts that Hinduism is nationalism, that being 'India' is equivalent to being 'Hindu', that Hinduism is the core of Indian cultural and religious tradition. It is therefore imperative to look at exactly what is the role of 'Hinduism' in the course of social-historical development in the Indian sub-continent.

The Role of Religion in Society

It is necessary to sketch a basic perspective on the material base of religion's hold over people and of the various forms it takes. Too often radicals tend to deal with this important question by contrasting 'religion' with 'science' and seeing religion as arising out of human ignorance and helplessness before natural events. The analysis that follows from this is that the hold of religion should be the strongest in the most 'primitive' societies and that it should gradually decrease as science and technology and with them human control over nature develop. A corollary is the common tendency among Marxists in India to see religion as 'feudalistic' and to assume that it is incompatible not simply with socialism but even with a scientifically based rationalistic capitalist society. This approach makes it difficult to understand the continuing appeal of religion and the powerful social force it constitutes today whether in fundamentalistic or socially radical forms—except as a result of the inadequacy, uneveness or failure of capitalist development. It seems to be empirically contradicted not only by the continuing hold of religion even in the most capitalistically advanced countries of the world today but also by the fact that we see the least (not the most) characteristics of religion in pre-class hunting and gathering societies which frequently lack the main forms of religious alienation and the dominant notions associated with religion such as god, soul, life after death.

Marx himself did not see religion as due primarily to lack of scientific knowledge and technological capability; nor did he characterise it as merely the 'opium of the people', a tool used by the ruling class to befuddle the masses. Nor was his approach a 'functionalist' one which saw religion or value systems as necessary to maintain social unity. His approach was succinctly set forward in the Fourth of the *Theses on Feuerbach*:

> Feuerbach starts out from the fact of religious self-alienation, the duplication of the world into a religious, imaginary world and a real one. His work consists in the dissolution of the religious world into its secular base. He overlooks the fact that after completing this work, the chief thing still remains to be done. For the fact that the secular foundation detaches itself from itself and establishes itself in the clouds as an independent realm is really only to be explained by the self-cleavage and self-contradictoriness of this secular base. The latter must itself, therefore, first be understood in its contradiction and then, by the removal of the contradiction, revolutionised in practice. Thus, for instance, once the earthly family is discovered to be the secret of the holy family, the former must then itself be criticised in theory and revolutionised in practice.

Religion is a part of the 'superstructure'. As such, while it possesses the relative independence of the superstructure, the main focus in understanding and dealing with it is on the material social conditions it expresses. But these conditions are not primarily the relations between humans and nature, but rather contradictory and exploitative class relations (and, as the passage indicates, gender relations or—in the Indian case—caste relations). To put it in another way, religion is primarily constituted with reference to the relations of production, not the forces of production. When, as in pre-class societies, these relations are collective, there is little base for religion regardless of how little scientific knowledge of nature and technology the small band may possess. And where, as in modern capitalism, the huge technologies and power to transform nature achieved by human society are alienated from the control of their basic producers and indeed serve to make their subordination more firm, there is fertile ground for religion, whether the toiling, people themselves are relatively affluent (as in societies like the one in the US) or impoverished.

The fact of religion's continuing force, and the various forms religion takes are constituted in reference to the dominating class, gender, racial, caste, etc, relations of society. Religions come into existence, historically, with the emergence and crystallisation of these contradictory relations of production,

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and will continue to exist as long as they remain. There is, however a further important conclusion from this approach. In reflecting the contradictions of social base, religions do not simply serve ruling class needs or 'function' to maintain the cohesiveness of the society: they themselves have contradictory aspects and in many of their forms serve as expressions of popular aspirations and popular revolt. Ruling classes do use religion, but so do the people who engage in resistance and revolt. Both can do so because of the ambivalence and contradictoriness contained in religious forms themselves. Thus religious traditions, indeed all cultural traditions, are themselves ambivalent and contradictory. We may see today's 'fundamentalism' and 'liberation theology' as conscious political projects, one of which seeks to consolidate and expand religion's conservative aspects, the other of which seeks to consolidate and expand religion's radical forms of expression and functions to join revolutionary movements.

The Emergence and Consolidation of Brahmanic Hinduism

With this framework in mind, we can look at the emergence of the major religions of India—Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism—in the middle of the first millennium BC. It was a period of social turmoil, of the expansion of production and trade, of the break-up of tribal and lineage-based collectivities, of the emergence of private property and increasing economic differentiation, of the development of the caste structure (*jati*, as opposed to *varna*) and patriarchy and growth of the state. Individuals and social groups suffered the consequences of this process; sects, philosophies and religions developed out of it, created by forest-dwelling ascetics even more than by priests and intellectuals residing in courts of the emerging kings. They drew on themes and ideas going back to Vedic and non-Vedic tribal pre-class societies and even back to the early Indus civilisation; they shared some common themes such as the notion of *karma*; they reacted to a common situation which included the unique Indian social structure of *jati* as well as forms of class and gender inequalities—but there was a plethora of varied and brilliant ideological creations.

Nevertheless, with all the variety, one can distinguish between religious-philosophical thinking which ran along whole-heartedly with the emerging caste-class-state society, and worked to consolidate it, and those traditions and sects which in some way or another sought to resist, counteract or transform it. What we now know as 'Hinduism' (but which others in India still call 'Brahmanism') emerged as the consolidation of the first stream and Buddhism and Jainism (classified today as religions) and *Lokayatas, Ajvikas*, etc (philosophical schools or sects) represented varying expressions of the second stream. The division was along caste lines as much as class ones, with the dissenting stream based primarily among non-brahmans and among forest-ascetics.

Though the VHP defines Hinduism as the 'national religion' of India inclusive of Buddhism, Jainism, etc, it has to be stressed that even today the majority of Buddhists and Jains in India do not consider themselves to be Hindus; neither do Sikhs; while sects such as the *Veerashaivas* (based primarily in Karnataka) have showed a constant and perhaps now increasing tendency to define themselves as non-Hindus. Two thousand years ago also, brahmanic Hinduism existed in contention with Buddhism and Jainism, its major 'religious' opponents. For, in spite of claims about Hinduism's pluralism and diversity, about its having an 'orthopraxy' and not an 'orthodoxy', Hinduism does have a set of core beliefs. These can be identified as: first, existence of a divine being, whether defined dualistically or non-dualistically (Agehananda Bharat, in his autobiography *The Ochre Robe*, notes this was a significant dividing line between what his Hindu mentors considered permissible and the concepts of *nirvana* or *sunyata* in Buddhism); second, acceptance of the authority of the Vedas; third, acceptance of *varnashrama dharma* defining the ideal social order, i e, acceptance of the caste system and the authority of the brahmans. (Even in the very earliest period the *mlecchа* lands, it should be noted, were those where the caste system was not practised and brahmans were not honoured.)

Buddhism and Jainism—though they accepted such notions as *karma* and drew on as equally ancient traditions as brahmanic Hinduism—rejected these core beliefs and were therefore considered heterodox. These religions retained influence and even hegemony in large parts of India for a millennium; it was only during the period of the sixth to tenth centuries AD that brahmanic Hinduism succeeded in consolidating its position in most parts of the country as the hegemonic religion. It did so through two processes. One was one of absorption and incorporation of many of the gods, goddesses, heroic figures, legends, etc, of various local and pre-existing indigenous traditions; sometimes this meant leaving a local deity like Vithoba of Maharashtra his 'regional' identity but linking him to the Hindu pantheon by describing him as an avatar of Vishnu; at other times it meant—particularly where Buddhism or Jainism were involved—replacement, as when the Satavahana-period Buddhist caves near Nasik were linked with the Mahabharat story and described as the 'Pandava caves'. The other major process was the use of state power and violence, for while the lack of a well-documented historiography in the Indian tradition leaves few clear records, popular literature has often reflected the conflict. Thus for example in Tamil Nadu where brahmanic orthodoxy managed finally to co-opt or absorb the indigenous Tamil *Sangam* period tradition, it did so in a process of a historically shadowy but apparently powerful conflict with Jainism; as David Ludden writes in *Peasant History in South India*, "Tamil literature makes it painfully clear that the foundations of the medieval synthesis were soaked in blood from battles that established the temple-centred, devotional brahmanic religious ceremonial practice at the centre of agrarian order" (p 204). The fact is that religions, including Hinduism, have always been linked with the state as well as with forms of popular rebellion against existing states. But the particular forms of this vary. In the period of capitalism, the relation is indirect, with the state formally separating itself from both religion and the economy, but with the linkage reconstituting itself as religions define themselves in nationalistic and occasionally in socialistic terms. In the pre-capitalist period, the linkage has been direct, with state often cloaking themselves in religious forms and directly enforcing religious precepts. In the case of Hinduism, rulers enforced the caste hierarchy and the authority and prestige of brahmans; where they were reluctant to do so they faced tremendous resistance that either succeeded in imposing orthodoxy on them or even leading to deposing them. (Shivaji, for example, was described as *go-brahman pratipalak* by the orthodox brahman saint Ramdas and was depicted as the disciple of Ramdas, whereas there is no historical evidence that he ever met Ramdas and his own seals give no such description.) Brahmanic dominance involved always a re-interpretation of history, ranging from the myths surrounding Shivaji and Ramdas to reinterpretation of the lineages of rulers who patronised brahmans to establish them as proper 'kshatriyas' and kings; it is often argued that the pervasiveness of this process is one reason for the lack of a historiographical tradition in India.

But why could brahmanic Hinduism triumph over Buddhism, which after all has become an even more widespread religion? The answer seems to be that brahmanism fits much better into the caste-based social structure of India, which had its own independent roots prior to the rise of all of these religious traditions. It provided the ideological justification for a relatively 'advanced' and productive, hierarchical feudal society. Analysing Indian society means seeing its contradictions, its class, caste and patriarchy-ridden relations of production as expressed in different forms, as crystallised and reflected in multiple religious (and cultural) traditions. Of these, Hinduism is the most thoroughly linked to caste; other traditions have opposed, questioned, tried to ignore it. This has made Hinduism more adaptive to the specific social structure of the Indian sub-continent—which gives the single basis today for ideologues of militant Hinduism to claim that 'Hindu' is equivalent to 'Indian'. But it does not mean that Hinduism alone is 'Indian'—it only means that it represented the exploiting top of the hierarchy within the contradictory system. Other religions and sects represented in various ways and at various points peasant

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or popular or low-caste (non-Brahmanic) needs and poles of contradiction.

Buddhism, which by and large sought to ignore caste (though allowing for other forms of inequality) was a contender for social power and political influence in India for nearly a millennium. But it has established itself, on an enduring basis, as a dominant force primarily in those southeast Asian societies that have maintained a relatively egalitarian village structure as their base (where today it admittedly reflects national chauvinism also in crucial cases) while in the more inegalitarian and patriarchal societies of China, India and Japan it has remained as a counter-tradition. In India, it practically vanished until its recent revival as a religion of protest for ex-untouchables by the brilliant dalit leader B R Ambedkar, who gave a strongly secular, social and 'liberation theology' interpretation of Buddhism in his book *The Buddha and His Dhamma*.

We might conclude from this that while all major religions have a mixture of oppressive and liberatory elements in them, the mix is different. It would appear that collective, egalitarian and rationalistic traditions have more weight in the Buddhist synthesis and can thus serve as a basis for the kind of 'liberation theology' interpretation Ambedkar gave. In contrast, the vast amounts of popular tradition absorbed in the Hindu synthesis, which have made it possible to play an integrating role for a thousand years, do give some scope for the expression of mass rebellious and egalitarian aspirations. These were most powerfully seen in the *bhakti* movements which invariably seemed to follow the consolidation of brahmanic Hindu hegemony—beginning in the Tamil south in the sixth to ninth centuries, they spread throughout India and for the whole of the subsequent millenium with men and women saints of every caste expressed the popular aspirations for equality, the popular agony against oppression and exploitation. In contrast to the earlier 'heterodox' religions, they expressed peoples' sufferings and protest but remained in the framework of Hindu caste orthodoxy, letting their desire for equality see its assumed fulfilment only in the religious sphere and not in social life where, paradigmatically, the Mahar saint Chokhamela was barred from the temple of Vithoba. Yet, the particular nature of its links with caste mean that rebellious and egalitarian traditions will inevitably lead on a trajectory out of Hinduism. (This may be true of any liberation theology within any religion; at some point the contradictions with religious dogma force a choice. With Hinduism this choice comes sooner.) It is hard to imagine a socialistic or 'liberation theology' interpretation of Hinduism the does not challenge the caste system and brahman authority, and it is with this that that break generally comes. Even in the period of the *bhakti* movements there was a tendency to move out of the framework which limited equality to the spiritual sphere and to form new religious groups—Kabir, Veerasaivism, and finally Sikhism. In the colonial period, when the material base for the overcoming of actual social inequalities was beginning to be established, we can see not only the updating and 'modernising' of brahmanic Hinduism by the interpretation of Hinduism as nationalism, but also the intensification of the conscious break with Hinduism both by the coming of a secular, socialist tradition and by radical religious reformers.

The Colonial Period and After

The colonial period saw a rise of nationalism and of social and religious reform; of militant Hinduism interpreted as nationalism and of full-scale challenges to religious tradition; of a new political integration of India and of increased Hindu-Muslim rioting and caste tension. What do all of these mean?

There are two arguments prevalent today to the effect that modern Hindu communalism is a completely new phenomenon, a product of contemporary capitalism and statism. One derives from a traditional Marxist tendency to dissolve all cultural and religious or "community" phenomena into the "superstructure". Put most strongly by Bipin Chandra, "communalism is not to be seen as a remnant of the past. The fact is that there was no communalism in medieval India, there could not have been, as communalism is an ideology which mobilises people and popular mobilisation and popular sovereignty did not exist in medieval ages... if communalism did not exist, religious communities did not exist either. There was no such thing as a Hindu community or a Muslim community or a Sikh community in that period" (quoted from a seminar on Communalism, reported by Asghar Ali Engineer in *Economic and Political Weekly*, May 5, 1984, pp 754). In this view, class dynamics lead to the effort to mobilise along communal or religious lines in the contemporary era.

Another "liberal Hindu" viewpoint represented by intellectuals such as Ashish Nandy and Rajni Kothari, argues that while there was something like a "Hindu civilisation" (and here they have a tendency to accept the colonial periodicisation of Indian history into "ancient" or Hindu, "medieval" or Muslim and "modern" contrasting "Hindu civilisation" with an "Arab-Muslim" civilisation), it was still pluralistic and open, representing a "confederation of cultures". As Ashish Nandy writes, "In traditional India... the state was clearly expected to be a part of culture and the king was expected to see himself not only as a protector of *dharma* but also as a protector of multiple ways of life and a promotor of ethnic tolerance" (footnote 1 to 'Culture, State and the Rediscovery of Indian Politics', *EPW*, December 8, 1984).

In this view, the contemporary aggressive communalism which pits people of different religions and communities against each other does not come from any inherent oppressive tendencies in the religion itself, but is a result of reacting to the secularising, homogensing and technocratic tendencies of contemporary capitalism and the state.

As against Bipin Chandra, it must be said that the "Hindu community" (or any other "community") has been in some sense a construct mobilised by certain sections for certain interests *both* in the contemporary and pre-colonial era; the difference is one of degree. "Mobilisation" has been much more intense and virulent in the contemporary era, but it also took place in the pre-British period and in the broad sense there a "Hindu community". As against Nandy it has to be pointed out that the king who protected brahmanic-Hindu *dharma* in "traditional India" was enforcing not simply multiple ways of life but a position in a hierarchy of various castes and communities: the paradigm being Rama who killed the untouchable boy shambuk for "stepping out of his place", that is for trying to follow the way of life of the "twice-born". Obviously, it made a significant difference whether the ruler was promoting a brahmanic *dharma*, or, like the emperor Ashoka, a vaguely moralistic *dhamma*. And as against both, it has to be said that those who were mobilising around a "Hindu" ideology were identifiable not simply in 'class' terms but in 'caste' terms also, and that the Hindu version of *dharma* was *not* to be simply identified with all of ancient or traditional Indian civilisation, and that it was hegemonic from a much later period that the normal careless use of the term assumes.

Those who began to mobilise under the ideology of militant Hinduism from the latter half of the nineteenth century onwards were likewise identifiable not so much in "class" terms (as part of the newly educated middle class, etc) as in caste terms: they were almost overwhelmingly brahman. They had a variety of purposes—to defend Indian tradition from—what were racist western attacks; to try to rally mass support for the anti-imperialist struggle against British rule; and to defend brahmanic traditions against challenges from both brahman social reformers and middle and low caste radicals who questioned completely the right of brahmans to have any authority at all. Quite naturally the traditions they sought to popularise and use as a means for mass mobilisation were either brahman traditions or brahmanic reinterpretations of popular traditions, such as Tilak's *Ganpati* festival or the nineteenth century brahman interpretations of Shivaji and his period. They saw "Hindu civilisation" as deriving from the Vedic Aryans and as being the most ancient religion in India (an assumption made possible by the virtual decimation of Buddhism, the subordination of Jainism, and the fact that the Indus valley civilisation was not discovered until the 1820s). This allowed them to interpret caste distinctions in racial terms, brahmans and other twice-borns being Aryan descendants

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and *shudras* and untouchables, non-Aryan. But the low castes were incorporated either by an interpreted "kshatriya" lineage, or if they were dealing with untouchables, by promising them a place as *sudras* within a presumably reformed *chaturvarnya* (as in the Arya Samaj's *shuddhi* campaign). They popularised, in various ways popular religious ceremonies in which all *jatis* could take part, though without directly challenging the traditional hierarchy and leaving brahmans their traditional role in crucial life-stage spheres, such as marriage and death. And they characterise Christians and Muslims as alien, as products of foreign aggression.

Gandhi's relation to this ideology was a tragic one. It has been argued by Ravinder Kumar (in *Essays in the Social History of Modern India*) that Gandhi was the first nationalist leader to understand that in India people actually existed in terms of "communities" and that an "all-India" movement could be built only on the basis of alliances. It is true that Gandhi gave a great emphasis to achieving harmony and "unity" between what he saw as the "Hindu community" and Muslims and other minorities; in the end he was assassinated for this by the most militant of the Hindu nationalist groups, the RSS, who saw him as making too many compromises with Muslims. Yet Gandhi's alliances assumed the "Hindu community" as a framework, and within this he used central themes drawn from brahmanic Hinduism, including "Ram-Rajya" and a defence of *varnashramadharama*. This was not simple innocent use of "popular themes, for it brought him into direct conflict with the untouchable leader B R Ambedkar, who registed having ex-untouchables, whom he preferred to call *dalit*, the "downtrodden" assimilated within the Hindu fold. There was a confrontation between Ambedkar and Gandhi on this issue at the second Round Table Conference in London in 1932, when it was clear that in resisting separate electorates for untouchables (while accepting them for Muslims and other "minorities"), Gandhi was speaking not as a national leader but as a *Hindu* leader concerned to keep untouchables as part of the "Hindu fold". His choice of the term "Harijan", which had no basis in any symbolism or terminology of actual untouchable communities in India, indicated this effort at incorporation, and was resisted not only by Ambedkar but by almost all militant untouchables. In spreading a reformist Hindu ideology, Gandhi in fact helped lay the ground for a militant and "communal" use of this ideology.

It would be perhaps legitimate for scholars to accept the uncritical use of terms such as 'Hindu' (community), 'Mulsim' (community), etc, if these had gone without challenge in their own day. But what we find is that there was a consistent opposition to such a categorisation by major middle and low caste (non-brahman and dalit) spokesmen from the nineteenth century onwards. The most important of these are Phule, Ambedkar and Periyar.

Jyotirao Phule (1827-1890), a Maharashtrian *mali* (gardener caste), sought to forge a unity of middle and low castes (which he described variously as *shudra-atishudra, mali-kunbi-mahar-mang*, etc) using popular religious traditions rigorously avoiding the use of the term or category 'Hindu'. He was the first to turn the 'Aryan theory of race' upside down to argue that all the non-brahman castes were the original inhabitants of India, conquered and enslaved by cunning Aryans, whose brahman heirs continued to use control of political power and religious ideology from up through British times (when their control over education allowed them to dominate the bureaucracy) as the means for exploiting the peasantry. As against symbols like Rama and Krishna, Phule posed Bali Raja (a mythical peasant king whose memory still lives in popular folk-sayings in Maharashtra and whose festival of *Onam* is the major popular festival in the state of Kerala, but who was incorporated in the 'Sanskritising' or 'Hinduisation' process as a *rakshas* or demon king sent down under the earth by the brahman boy Vaman, an avatar of Vishnu) as the heroic figure of this popular tradition and frequently used the term 'Balistan' as an alternative to 'Hindustan'. The recent study of Phule by Rosalind O'ttanla *Caste, Conflict and Ideology* (Cambridge University Press, 1985) gives a useful analysis of Phule's use of such symbolism in the social contest of his time. He also propagated the equality of women and established a marriage cremony for his Satyashodhak Samaj that was not only without priests but incorporated vows of equality and independence for the bride. Phule used nineteenth century theism as a base for his model of what he called "sarvajanik satya dharma" (public or universal religion of truth) and he saw Muslims and Christians as having a more egalitarian religion than brahmanic Hinduism and as playing a liberating role for the masses in Indian (and Maharashtrian) history.

This reversal of the 'Aryan theory'—with its theme of an original golden age marked by the equality of all original inhabitants and the derivation of brahmanic Hinduism and the caste hierarchy from a conquest by invading Aryans—gained widespread following throughout India in the 1920s, where it was used especially by untouchable groups throughout India as an assertion of equality and a rejection of a Hindu identity. These movements included the *Adi-dharm* movement in Punjab, the Adi-Hindu movement in UP (and among a small group in Hyderabad) and the Adi-Andhra, Adi-Karnataka and 'Adi-Dravida' identifications of dalits in the Telugu, Kannada and Tamil-speaking regions. The "adivasi' movement arising among tribal communities in south Bihar from the mid-1930s had a similar theme.

But this 'non-Aryan' identification with its overtones of rejection of Hinduism was also a very powerful strand in the non-brahman movements in the Maharashtrian and Tamil areas from the 1920s onwards, though it was balanced partly offset by a Hindu "sanskritising" tendency to claim 'kshatriya' status. Even the early non-brahman movement of Madras, for instance, began to argue that 'Saivaism' was a non-Hindu, non-brahmanic religion. However it was E V Ramaswamy (Periyar), who came to prominence in temple entry struggles in the 1920s and who in the 1930s took the leadership of the failing Madras non-brahman movement out of the hands of the feudal leaders of the Justice Party and identified it with a vague socialism, who became the most well known spokesman of an anti-Hindu version of 'Dravidianism' (as the southern 'non-Aryan' identity was developed). Periyar—whose self-respect marriages and assertions of the equality of women closely parallels those of Phule—proclaimed atheism, denounced Brahmanism, and interpreted the *Ramayana* as an Aryan conquest of south India with Ravana not Rama, as the hero. (This reversal of the Ramayana has been widespread throughout India, with various interpretations of it as being a struggle between Aryans and non-Aryans, between brahmanism and Buddhism, and between patriarchy and matriarchy, or at least matriliny. It can be noted in the latter context that the contemporary radical woman's magazine *Manushi* has published a UP folk version of part of the *Ramayana*, in which an exiled Sita refuses to go back to her husband and gives her children not Rama's name but that of her father.)

Finally the Maharashtrian dalit (ex-untouchable) leader B R Ambedkar (1891-1956), announced in 1935 after a series of failed temple entry efforts that though he was born a Hindu he would not die a Hindu, and finally in 1956 at the time of his death organised a mass conversion to Buddhism, thus resurrecting this ancient religion in India. Ambedkar gave a secular-socialistic 'liberation theology' interpretation of Buddhism in his last major work, *The Buddha and His Dhamma* sharply contrasting *dhamma* as morality with the immoral caste hierarchy of *dharma*. Politically, Ambedkar sought both to establish the autonomous identity of dalits and to organise an alliance of dalits and non-brahmans, and to take up issues of peasants and workers to build a broad class-caste front against the 'bourgeois-brahman' Congress.

If we add to these various 'anti-Hindu' traditions the trends in Sikhism, Veerasaivism and Jainism it can be seen that from the 19th century onwards the existence of a 'Hindu majority community' was continually challenged and continues to be so today. Liberals, from Ranade and Gokhale to Gandhi, in effect participated in the projects of constructing such a 'Hindu community', which in the end those who represented the ideology of militant and aggressive communalism took advantage of. But the trend of rejecting a Hindu identity was

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very widespread among the middle and low caste masses, though the direction of the alternative religious identity (i e, a broad theism, assertion of a tribal religion, atheism, etc) was quite varied.

In this context the role of the Left, of Communists and Socialists, was both ironic and also in a sense tragic. They themselves were most often atheistic and resolutely secular; they proclaimed a secular ideology; they vigorously and often heroically fought casteism, male power, religious tyranny. Yet throughout the entire pre-independence period, a narrow class ideology kept them from theorising the reality of caste and community and of seeing the necessity of fighting Hindu communalism at the level of religious and cultural identities. In the 1920s and 1930s, while liberal and conservatives alike (Gandhians on one side and Arya Samajists and Hindu Mahasabhaites on the other) were wooing dalits with temple entry programmes, organisational efforts and proclaimed reforms, they saw all this as nothing but a dangerous diversion from the presumably central 'anti-imperialist struggle'. It was an attitude shared by all the Left, from Nehru and the Congress Socialists to the Communists. Their leaders, again overwhelmingly brahman, accepted their own identity and that of all the middle and low castes as 'Hindu' and accepted uncritically the Gandhian term 'Harijan' with its incorporationist symbolism. Not until Ram Manohar Lohia in the 1950s proclaimed an effort to have a broad front of 'Harijans, *sudras*, tribals, Muslims and women' did a socialist seek to deal explicitly with both caste and gender oppression—but even Lohia put this within a framework of liberal Hinduism, trying to contrast the 'Vasistha' with the 'Vishvamitra' (liberal versus conservative) traditions in Hinduism. Communists especially until well into the 1960s and 1970s continued to view leaders like Phule, Ambedkar and Periyar, and the anti-brahman, anti-Congress organisational efforts they made, as serving the interests of imperialism, and completely disregarded their broader message.

Is India 'Hindu': The Current Conflicts

We have seen that there has been both a gradual process of construction of a 'Hindu community' in India and one of rendering it militant and aggressive to the point of terrorising those religious communities identified as 'minorities'. Both historically and in the contemporary period, brahmanic Hinduism has both attacked religious groups which consciously identify themselves as non-Hindu—from Buddhism and Jainism to Islam—and has sought to maintain the caste hierarchy which subordinates middle and low castes to a brahman and politically and economically defined ruling elite (brahmans-kshatriyas-vaishyas). This has taken both liberal and aggressive forms, but both have agreed in equating 'India' and 'Hindu' and defining the 'Hindu tradition' as somehow the core of an Indian tradition. But at the same time this 'Hindu majority' in both its liberal and aggressive *Hindutva* forms has been continually under challenge from below, from socially and economically oppressed groups, in an ideological process related to the dialectics of class-caste-gender struggle in India.

Following the ninth Lok Sabha elections, there is a good deal of irony even in the contemporary situation itself.

On one hand, militant *Hindutva* forces seemed to have attained unprecedented strength. In a seeming cultural resurgence of the Rama-Krishna tradition, the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharat* TV shows have won immense popularity throughout India in the last two years. At the political level, the BJP (and in Maharashtra the BJP-Shiv Sena combine) have made a powerful political gain, accompanied by a wave of communal riots. Money, power, and organisation appear to be flowing from and to these organisations, 'Centrist' political forces have appeared to be leaning right: the Congress, for instance, has been always compromising. In fact in the 1984 general elections, Rajiv Gandhi achieved his massive victories (and took the steam out of the BJP at the time) not only with the sympathy wave following Indira Gandhi's death but by 'playing the Hindu card', using slogans of *akhand Bharat* and 'national integration'; he has ever since continued to be associated with the religious symbols of Hinduism and with a political compromise with the *Hindutva* forces. The Janata Dal has similarly shown Hindu-leaning trends.

And yet, there are other significant indicators. Even looking at the 1989 parliamentary election results can give a different equation. While the BJP won 88 seats (and the Shiv Sena four), the various communist parties, representing at least secular forces and consistently accused by the spokesmen of militant Hinduism of being 'anti-national' and pro-Muslim, won a total of 52. These included the CPI's Mitzasen Yadav, who won in Faizabad (the constituency of Ayodhya) itself in spite of a united campaign by the Congress and the BJP against him; the cost of his stand was shown when he was badly wounded by his opponent's hoodlums after his victory. And in a neighboring constituency of Kanpur, the CPM's Subhashini Ali, a Hindu woman married to a Muslim was victorious. When asked her opinion about the Ramjanmabhoomi controversy she said that in place of both temple and mosque "public conveniences", ie, toilet facilities, should be built: in spite of a vicious propaganda war against her she won by 57,000 votes.

There is more to the voting equation. The big winners in the Punjab (seven parliamentary seats) were the Akali Dal (S S Mann group) representing the Sikh militants, who demand autonomy within the Indian constituency and firm in an anti-Hindu Sikh identity; their victors include the wife and father of Beant Singh, one of the murderers of Indira Gandhi, winning by one to two lakh vote margins. The Jharkhand Mukti Morcha, representing the heritage of Birsa Munda, won three seats, and the Bahujan Samaj Party of Kanshi Ram, won three seats (two in UP and one in the Punjab) in spite of making no electoral adjustments with anyone, claiming the heritage of Ambedkar and trying to unite middle, low castes and minorities under the slogan *brahman, bania, thakur, chor, baki sab DS-4*, (i e, brahmans, banias and thakurs are thieves, all the rest are of our side). The BSP had not only a solid base among dalits but also won a significant Muslim and Sikh minority vote and some even from the 'other backward castes'.

This gives a total of 65 clear 'anti-Hindu' seats as against the 93 seats to the parties of militant Hinduism.

Further, centrist political forces have *not* been moving 'right'; quite the contrary. In the last election the Congress was forced away from a pro-Hindu rhetoric. Though Rajiv Gandhi started out by talking of 'Ram-Rajya', he quickly abandoned it as a theme, fearing it would only damage his electoral chances. In the political realm 'Ram-Rajya' apparently does not have the ability to win a majority, while the Gandhian and Hinduistic term 'harijan' is gradually getting replaced throughout India by the Ambedkarite and militant, non-Hindu term 'dalit'. The Janata Dal, the party now in power, itself has varying trends, and its leader, V P Singh, was towards the end of the election taking a firm anti-*Hindutva* stance and refusing to appear on platforms with the BJP. Far from hurting his chances, this seems to have helped them in UP and Bihar, and the BJP and its allies in fact won most of their seats in states where they had electoral adjustments with the Janata Dal, where the Janata Dal leadership was not only unwilling to oppose the ideology of militant Hinduism but was itself caught up in it. This indicates that far from the majority of Indian people being militantly Hinduistic, these forces are at best a strong minority and the BJP-Shiv Sena won a lot of its votes through other factors than popular support for their ideology.

The state of Maharashtra shows both some of the current ambiguities in the polarisation of forces, and the potential swiftness of change. It is a state where the most aggressive militant Hindu force, the Shiv Sena, has been making the most rapid gains, accompanied with rhetoric centring on the depiction of the 16th century king Shivaji as the founder of a 'Hindu kingdom' fighting against Muslim invaders. Yet popular interpretation of Shivaji, who is undeniably a Maharashtrian hero, is disputable and is being disputed by an alternative interpretation of him as a leader of peasants against both Hindu and Muslim exploiters. And the other two popular Maharashtrian historic heroes, Phule and Ambedkar, were clearly anti-Hindu. The social forces behind their popularity could be seen in two incidents in the last two years. The first was when

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the Maharashtra government published Ambedkar's previously unpublished *Riddles of Hinduism* which included a scathing attack on Ram and Krishna as both irrational and immoral: when the Shiv Sena demanded its withdrawal and threatened to organise huge demonstrations all over the state, dalits and allied progressive forces organised even bigger demonstrations (of one to two hundred thousand) in Bombay and forced the government to continue the book's publication (in fact the controversy certainly increased is circulation and resulted in a flood of Marathi translations). The second was when a brahman scholar wrote a very nasty attack on Phule in a popular (brahman-edited) weekly *Sobat*, and both author and publication were forced, by demonstrations all over the state, and resolutions by practically every Marathi literary organisation as well as various mass organisations to apologise and retract. This social force behind the 'names' of Phule and Ambedkar may not represent an understanding of their ideology, but it does show a continuing mass popularity that needs to be explained in the tackling of the seeming growth of the opposite forces.

It is interesting that the 'new social movements', including the dalit, women's, peasant and ecologgy movements which have been particularly strong in Maharashtra, have consistently had an anti-Hindu cultural thrust. This is obviously true in the case of the dalit movement. In the case of the women's movement, the cultural shift can be seen in the fact that the pre-independence tendency to take Sita as an ideal has practically vanished while the saying of the orthodox Manu that 'when young a woman should be under control of her father, when mature under her husband, when old under her son; a woman should never be independent' is almost ritually invoked in women's meetings as the symbol of patriarchal subordination. Along with this, the various organisations of the women's movemnt have taken the fight against communalism as a central task. Similarly, the powerful farmers' movement or 'new peasant movement' in Maharashtra the Shetkari Sanghathana has taken Bali Raja (not 'Ram Raja') as a central symbol (as have the most mass-based sections of the ecology movement). It has consistently related to the tradition of Jyotirao Phule and, while also using Shivaji, has interpreted him as a peasant king and not a leader of Hindus against Muslims. The November 8-10 conference of the women's wing of the Shetkari Sanghatana, attended by 2,00,000 peasant men and women, not only adopted resolutions on women's property rights and the struggle for political power, but also targeted the fight against communalism as a central task. The Shetkari Sanghatana's leader Sharad Joshi, a maverick brahman, now is leading the farmers to spearhead the fight against the Shiv Sena and Hindu communalism, by organising a massive 25-day 'Phule-Ambedkar prachar yatra' (propaganda tour in honour of the centenaries of the two Maharashtrian heroes) in January.

The problem has been the political articulation of all of these movements. The women's movement and environmental movement have been organisationally weak as far as mass level expression is concerned. Dalits have been organisationally strong but politically ghettoised. The farmers' movement has been organisationally strong but politically weak; wherever such movements have sought to directly take a political form (organising their own parties) in India in the last decade, they have failed badly: mass 'demand group' power does not easily translate into a political force. The Shetkari Sanghatana had thus at the time of the November 1989 elections taken a 'non-political stance' and stayed out of direct politics, arguing that no major changes can come through elections anyway, and had only supported candidates, invariably of the opposition 'left and democratic forces'. This has had the disadvantage that the opposition had come to take the Sanghatana's support for granted, while the increasing disillusionment of Sanghatana members with the opposition has led to pressure for more direct participation.

The recent political victories of the BJP and Shiv Sena in Maharashtra have thus been to a large degree due to the weakness of an alternative political leadership. The Communist left has been a declining force, for various reasons but partly due to the unprecedented contemporary world crisis in communism which is becoming visible even to many ordinary villagers with the spread of newspaper and televisions ('They knocked down the wall? What wall? You mean people wanted to leave and they could not leave?') The Janata Dal has failed not only to find a social base in Maharashtra but to take any firm political line visible to the masses of people. Within the party the strongest force had been the party's 'rural leaders' (mainly local political bosses) of various areas who had invariably pushed for compromise with the BJP-Shiv Sena forces; the dalit and women's forces within the party (represented by secretary Mrinal Gore and ex-Dalit Panther Arun Kamble) had opposed compromise but were weak. During the last elections the Communists and the Shetkari Sanghatana both strongly opposed compromise from outside, and as a result there was no overall policy of seat adjustment, but the Janata Dal and left parties together could not find good candidates and in several individual cases JD candidates were withdrawn as party leaders tried to arrange individual compromises to save their own seats. The result was the JD-led alliance looked both unprincipled and weak—in contrast to the apparently bold, aggressive, 'principled' and powerful stand of the BJP-Shiv Sena. In the elections only five JD candidates won and 19 did so badly as to lose their election deposits. However, with assembly elections due in February there was a dramatic shift in the situation in the last two weeks of December 1989. The Kamgar Aghadi of working class militant Datta Samant and the Shetkari Sanghatana have in effect joined the Janata Dal resulting both in an increase in Janata Dal's strength in rural Maharashtra and a firm policy to have no compromising with communal forces and to put up candidates for the Janata Dal and its left allies in every constituency (more pressure for women candidate is also on). Sharad Joshi of the Shetkari Sanghatana is pushing this alliance the Progressive Democratic Front (PDF) to transform the assembly elections into a referendum not only on such issues as higher prices for agricultural products but also on that of the tradition of Phule versus that of militant Hinduism.

Three conclusions can be stressed in regard to the role of 'Hinduism' in Indian tradition and the Hindu identity in Indian politics.

The first is that the concept of the 'majority Hindu community' is a social construct—a project of brahmanic Hinduism throughout Indian history which has involved both the maintenance of a caste hierarchy with brahmans at the top and the subordination of religions which have denied brahman and Vedic authority; it has always existed in a process of struggle in the Indian sub-continent. The weight of anti-Hindu identification in India as a whole is much greater than western scholars normally give it credit for. One thing, that prevents this from being seen is that a non-Hindu identity or anti-brahmanic identity has no single positive focus—it is expressed in 'religious' form in terms of Sikhism, Jainism, Buddhism, Veerashaivism, in 'social' form as dalits, adivasis, as atheism, as secularism.

Second, contrary to the melodramatic tone of the *Illustrated Weekly*, the BJP cannot be called the 'real victors' of the recent ninth Lok Sabha election in India. Rather than seeing the clashing social forces in contemporary India in terms of the rise of 'communalism' it would be more accurate to see a greater polarisation of religious and cultural identifications in the society. The ideology of militant Hinduism is on the rise only in the sense that it is becoming more aggressive, not that it has become more predominant in society. And it would appear that some of the reasons for its gains in recent years are due to the political weakness of forces claiming to represent a secular, socialist, atheistic, liberatory alternative here we might include both 'liberal Hindu' and 'anti-Hindu' forces). And political weakness can always be remedied; political changes may take place with as much rapidity in India as elsewhere.

Economic and Political Weekly

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